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In Search of Divine Liberated Love: A Yoga Memoir

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**In Search of Divine Liberated Love:
A Yoga Memoir**

by

Katie Davidson

A thesis present to the

Faculty of the Department of
Yoga Studies
Loyola Marymount University

In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Yoga Studies

Dr. Christopher Key Chapple

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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2017, I sat in a circle of 30-something strangers at a yoga studio in Santa Cruz. One of my best friends had invited me to come to a 50-hour weekend intensive, a part of her 200-hour yoga teacher training that was open to the public. I had recently moved back to California from the east coast. I was still fairly new to yoga but curious and interested in finding a new studio and community. I was excited—until one of the lead teachers informed us we would be going around the room sharing our intentions for being there. I was horrified. *She expects us to open our mouths, one at a time, and share—what?—a flowery word or even worse the truth? What we were thinking and feeling? No thank you. What the hell kind of training was this, and how can I get out of it?* I wondered. *Maybe I can quietly get up to go to the bathroom... Or, maybe I can somehow, inconspicuously get my friend's keys out of her bag to wait for her in the car...*

As everyone started sharing their words, which would get various versions of smiles and nods and “oohs” and “ahhhs” and “mmms” and hands to hearts from the others in the circle, I was silently panicking. This was my nightmare. I had no idea why I was there. I had no real interest in teaching yoga and was intimidated by everyone else that seemed to know exactly what they wanted to get out of the training. I willed myself to think of something clever and profound, or at least one of the words I had heard in a yoga class—*anything!*—but my mind was blank, face on fire, palms dampening, throat closing up.

I wanted to say, “Well, I’ve tried everything my family, friends, the media, and society told me I needed to do or be or have to be happy. I came close to marriage and kids. When that didn’t feel right, I ran away to New York City and landed a glamorous job. That didn’t feel right

either. Now I'm back, and I've never felt more alone, lost, or disconnected from myself. There's a good chance I'm broken, beyond help, but when one of my best friends, sitting here to my right, asked if I wanted to check out this training with her, I thought, *Why not? I truly have nothing left to lose and nowhere else to turn.*" But our teachers were clear our intention could only be one word or short phrase. All I could muster up, looking down to avoid anyone's gaze, was "leap of faith."

Little did I know that night that not only would I stay for the entire 200 hours of teacher training, rather than shying away, I would also spend the next two and a half years traveling the world, studying with this same teacher for my advanced certification, taking literal leaps of faith into foreign bodies of water and the depths of my unconscious. In hindsight, moving to New York was a Hanuman-like leap of faith. All milestones in my yoga journey that were yet to come would also require leaps of faith. Even applying to this Graduate Yoga Studies program—in a worldwide pandemic, no less—felt like a leap of faith. To others, including many close to me, these choices didn't make sense. But in my heart, I knew that these moves were guiding me to something greater.

I now understand that setting an intention is an evolution of the Sanskrit word, *saṅkalpa*, often translated as "intention" and a compound of the words *sam*, meaning "together" and *kalpa*, from the verb root *klṛp*, which can be translated as "acting" or "creating"¹. This is one of the first concepts we teach in DANC 174: Introduction to Yoga, an undergraduate course in the theatre department I was honored to teach this semester.

¹ Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, 1899

My *sankalpa* for entering into the Graduate Yoga Studies program at Loyola Marymount University was ultimately to integrate the experiences, including the unexpected educational and career pivot I took, after discovering Yoga.

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“There is a hope of finding something. One doesn’t proceed in darkness, but takes a lighted candle, which is sādhana. The more you step forward, the more the path appears in the light of that candle.”

—Baba Hari Dass, *Ashtanga Yoga Primer*

—

Svādhyāya, the Sanskrit term for “self-study” or “study of sacred texts”, then, became my *sādhana*, my vehicle for achieving my intention. In his book *Yoga and the Luminous: Patañjali's Spiritual Path to Freedom*, founding director of the Graduate Yoga Studies department at Loyola Marymount University (and my professor), Dr. Christopher Key Chapple, breaks down the word *svādhyāya* as follows:

- *sva*, meaning “own”
- *adhi*, “over” or “on”
- *ā*, “hither” or “onto”
- *ya*, “to go” (from the verb root √i)

By applying for a master’s degree, I was “going hither on my own.” My yoga path, both as a student and training around the world to become an advanced certified teacher, thus far was profound, and I wanted a way to integrate all that I had experienced. The past two years of self-study—conveniently at the first accredited university in the country to offer a graduate program

in Yoga Studies—were devoted to the historical, linguistic, theological, therapeutic, and modern-day movements of Yoga. As I learned to parse out everything from long strands of *devanāgarī*, the script found on ancient Indian caves and in source texts, to the complex history of Indian dharma traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, to the malleability of modern-day yoga movements, I also began to sort through the mystical and therapeutic experiences that made up my personal yoga journey as well as their significance to my personal *dharma*.

In her book *Dharma: The Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, and Sikh Traditions of India*, Veena R. Howard, PhD explains that Hindu morality is divided into *sadharana dharma*, universal duties that apply to all beings and *svadharma*, personal duties. Within the universal duties are *yamas*, or restraints (what not to do), and *niyamas*, commitments (what to do). One of the five *niyamas* is *svādhyāya*: self-study that includes both the examination of one's conscience and the study of sacred texts and spiritual philosophies (46-7).

On an obvious level, the last two years have involved the study of sacred texts and spiritual philosophies. Moreover, my yoga journey as a whole has encapsulated the examination of my conscience. Beyond how we understand it in a modern neoliberal context, personalized to each individual, *svādhyāya* also refers to memorizing and repeated recitation of the Vedas, including mastering mantras with accurate pronunciation, to orally preserve the sacred teachings of Yoga prior to scribing in premodern texts.

With my intention for integration in mind, I opted to write a memoir about my personal experiences in yoga, rather than a traditional research-based thesis. After enlisting the help of former LMU Graduate Yoga Studies program associate and M.A. graduate Sarah Herrington, who, among her many creative hats, is also an accomplished author, I realized an entire memoir

was a lofty goal but that a book proposal was a more achievable thesis project, one that would allow me to pursue publishing post-graduation. She helped me get clarity on how to structure this thesis by identifying the elements of a book proposal: an overview, including who I am, what the story is, and why I'm telling it; an outline; comparable titles, including why my memoir is different; and, finally, sample chapters.

A key distinction between memoir and autobiography or auto-ethnography is that it's not linear—much like my yoga journey. Often, experiences, particularly around healing emotional trauma, are more circular in nature, perhaps even more of a spiral. According to Carl Jung, “The spiral in psychology means that when you make a spiral you always come over the same point where you have been before, but never really the same, it is above or below, inside, outside, so it means growth.” (Jung 5, p. 21). In his book *Why Therapy Works: Using Our Minds to Change Our Brains*, Louis Cozolino, PhD explains that coherent narratives, such as Joseph Campbell's “the hero's journey”, are an important part of psychotherapy and provide a way for individuals to make sense of and heal from complex trauma. To illustrate this point, I will be employing the Jungian-inspired “heroine's journey” model developed by Maureen Murdock, PhD—a similar framework to the “hero's journey” but through a feminist lens.

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स्वाध्यायादिष्टदेवतासंप्रयोगः ॥ ४४ ॥

svādhyāyād iṣṭa devatā samprayogaḥ

From self-study (arises) union with the desired deity.

—*The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali*, II.44, as translated by Christopher Key Chapple, PhD,

Yoga and the Luminous: Patañjali's Spiritual Path to Freedom

Personal narrative can also be a form of self-study. I chose to organize my eventual memoir into three sections: Divine, Liberated, and Love. On their own, each word represents a crucial part of my yoga journey: Divine represents my invitation to the practice through isolated mystical experiences; Liberated represents the therapeutic benefits that kept me coming back to the mat, as well as my initiation into the depths of my shadow work and ultimately individuation from my *samskāras*, or “conscious our unconscious patterns of thought, communication, and behaviors” (*Yoga Therapy Foundations, Tools, and Practice* 2021, p. 285); and Love represents my integration, a union of the paradoxical nature of divinity and individuality. Combined, the phrase “Divine Liberated Love” has taken my initial intention of integration to a much deeper level, helping me to remember who I truly am and what matters to me.

In the process of writing my own narrative, I uncovered another intention: to share my story in service of others that may find themselves embarking on their own paths of self-study. When I was first starting out, it was a dark time in my life. I didn't have many resources, and I often felt disoriented, disconnected, and isolated. My hope is to shed light on some of the messy parts of healing and awakening that aren't always disclosed in a walk-in yoga class. May this memoir serve as a lighthouse for others experiencing darkness.

“We are meaning makers, and a sense of place is central to meaning-making...

We need language to label what we're experiencing. And, just like a map, the interaction between the layers of our emotions and experiences tells our story.”

—Brené Brown, *Atlas of the Heart*

Through the following collection of essays, I mark this auspicious, fleeting moment in my life. I honor this ending of graduation, celebrating where I have been and all I have learned, as well as all I have yet to learn, acknowledging the life-long learning nature of Yoga. I take a sacred pause right where I'm at during this transition.

To further mark my place in space and time, I'd like to acknowledge my social locations: I identify as a cis-gender, white woman of privilege. I was born into a middle-class family in California, a liberal state in the United States, a western democratic society rooted in capitalism. I attended private Catholic schools through high school and am now graduating from a Jesuit university. (My mom used to joke that she sent me to years of private schooling for me to become a “yogi”; ironically, it's my education at these religious institutions that opened my mind to different spiritual traditions and introduced me to Yoga. But I'll get there.)

BOOK PROPOSAL

I. Overview:

- **Who I am:** I am a soon-to-be graduate of the M.A. Yoga Studies program at Loyola Marymount University, a first-of-its-kind graduate program focusing on the historical, linguistic, theological, therapeutic, and modern-day movements of Yoga. The program offered me a critical lens to apply to modern yoga movements and discourse, particularly when integrating my personal yoga journey. Prior to the program, I traveled all over the world—to Costa Rica, Bali, Guatemala, India, and beyond—for teacher training but ultimately healing.

- **What the story is:** How I got far more than I bargained for when I walked into a New York yoga class. I had moved to New York City from California on my own with only two overstuffed suitcases, a two-month apartment sublet in Williamsburg, an unpaid internship, and a couple thousand dollar. I had left behind my entire world: a relationship of three and a half years (the longest and most serious I had ever been in), my whole family, who, up until this point, my world and well-being revolved around, a modest job and community I loved, and two and a half decades of living my life for everyone else. I didn't know who I was without these things. But I was determined to find out.
- **Why I want to tell it:** My intention is to share my story in service of others that may find themselves embarking on their own paths of yoga, healing, and/or self-study. When I was first starting out, it was a dark time in my life. I didn't have many resources, and I often felt disoriented, disconnected, and isolated. My hope is to shed light on some of the messy parts of healing and awakening that aren't always disclosed in a walk-in yoga class. May this memoir serve as a lighthouse for others experiencing darkness.

II. Outline: This memoir will be a collection of essays divided into three sections, each containing at least five chapters.

- **Introduction**
- **Section I:** The first section, Divine, explores my invitation to the path of yoga. It includes the isolated mystical experiences, often after walk-in yoga classes, that sparked my interest, as well as how my spirituality evolved from my Catholic upbringing.

- **Section II:** The second section, *Liberated*, highlights my initiation into going deeper with the practice. It explores my healing process of individuation from the greatest malady yoga has helped me overcome: codependency.
- **Section III:** The final section, *Love*, is all about integration—my biggest takeaways, the lessons I’ve learned, and how they’ve changed my life.

III. Comp Titles:

- *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* by Elizabeth Gilbert
- *Untamed* by Glennon Doyle
- *The Universe Has Your Back* by Gabrielle Bernstein
- *Skill in Action: Radicalizing Your Yoga Practice to Create a Just World* by Michelle Cassandra Johnson
- *Atlas of the Heart* Brene Brown
- *The Heroine's Journey* by Maureen Murdock

IV. Sample Chapters:

SECTION 1: DIVINE (THE INVITATION)

Chapter 1: Just Let Go

I lay in *śavāsana* at the end of a yoga class at a studio I had stumbled upon in Greenpoint, a neighborhood in Brooklyn. It was the summer of 2013 and my first day in a new city (and state) where I didn’t know anyone. I was too anxious to relax, unsure of my new environment, not to mention my decision to move across the country. I was already feeling jittery when I heard

the teacher start moving around the room, the small objects she carried clinking as the scent of lavender and eucalyptus filled the space.

Eventually, she stopped near my mat and applied a mysterious tincture to the back of my neck. Next, she isolated my different sense organs one at a time by covering my face with her hands while the herbal fragrance intensified.

“Just let go,” she whispered in my ear. My body felt activated and frozen at the same time. (I now understand that my sympathetic nervous system is actually what was activated, and I was experiencing the freeze response.)

What the hell did that mean? I wondered as she walked away. My mind started racing. *Let go of what? Was my body in the wrong position? Is it even possible to do śavāsana wrong? Was her cryptic message specific to me, or was she whispering the same thing to everyone? And what the hell did she make me sniff? Could this random yoga studio I wandered into be drugging me into some kind of cult? Alone in a big city, I would be an easy target...*

At the time, I was new to yoga. While I had taken classes back home, I had no idea what essential oils were, nor was I used to so much hands-on touch in a yoga studio (consent and trauma-informed yoga clearly weren't a thing yet). Needless to say, that *śavāsana* didn't feel restful at all. Nor did my sleep the night before.

Less than 24 hours prior, I had moved to New York City from California on my own with only two overstuffed suitcases, a two-month apartment sublet in Williamsburg, an unpaid internship, and a couple thousand dollar. I had left behind my entire world: a relationship of three and a half years (the longest and most serious I had ever been in), my whole family, who, up until this point, my world and well-being revolved around, a modest job and community I loved,

and two and a half decades of living my life for everyone else. I didn't know who I was without these things. But I was determined to find out.

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“The wound is where the light enters you.”

—**Rumi**

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Two years later, I still couldn't let go, particularly of the love I left behind in California. It wasn't fair to ask of him, so I never did—not out loud anyway—but I clung to the idea that he would wait for me. In fact, it was the only thought I had that gave me the courage to risk moving to New York in the first place. *If we were truly meant for each other, I told myself, he could wait for me to face my demons, to heal whatever I needed to heal within me.* A year after I moved away, he told me he wanted to see other people, leaving out the part that he had already met someone (also named Katie). Less than a year after that, they were engaged. I was gutted.

I returned to the practice of yoga, but this time on my knees. Out of defeat and desperation rather than casual curiosity, I attended one of Gabrielle Bernstein's events in Montauk—smaller than her sold-out, book tour events at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral I've also attended but a packed house nevertheless. “Spirit Junkies”² crammed into The Surf Lodge to hear her speak and do a little yoga (and get a free Lululemon yoga mat).

A nod to her first published book about her journey into sobriety, as well as from NYC publicist and party girl into spiritual student and teacher, “spirit junkie” is also the term she used to describe her growing following. I, myself, sought her out after finding that the success I found

² Bernstein, G. (2015). *Spirit junkie: A radical road to self-love and miracles*. Hay House.

from my own glamorous career left me feeling unfulfilled. I wondered how someone in my industry had found fulfillment through meditation, yoga, and devotion to a spiritual practice. Meanwhile, I was heartbroken, desperate to try anything that might make me feel better. No matter what I accomplished in my career or what thrilling peak experience I had in New York, I couldn't shake my heavy, grieving heart. Maureen Murdock would refer to these phases of "the heroine's journey," in which a woman separates from the Divine Feminine to either fit into a patriarchal society and/or because of a mother-daughter wound, as "finding the boon of success" followed by "awakening to feelings of spiritual aridity or death." (Murdock 2013)

We started doing yoga under the hot sun—not a cloud in the sky that day—all edges of our new Lululemon mats kissing our neighbors'. With her long blonde hair cascading down her tiny frame and a straw hat to shade her from the blazing sun, Bernstein guided us into a Kundalini movement meditation toward the end of the sequence, instructing us to pump our arms up and down as vigorously as we could. I had never heard the word "kundalini" before, and she didn't offer much context as to what it meant or what it was. I did as I was told for what felt like far too long. The sun beating down on us, as sweat starting drifting down my face, I was ready to stop, but she insisted we keep going and push past the discomfort. I didn't want to let her down, the only one in the sea of spirit junkies giving up, so I closed my eyes and continued, silently praying the exercise would be over soon. Instead, I drifted into a dream-like state and was transported 5,000 miles away to a secluded beach I remember from my first trip to Hawaii as a child.

I knew this place well. Though that trip is a distant memory, I'll never forget walking along the shore of this quiet beach until I got to the end, marked by a large piece of driftwood, or

the feeling of stepping into warm ocean water for the first time. A California native, I've always lived at least an hour away from the coast and spent much of my time taking in the gorgeous views and basking in the sun. But I was never interested in the icy, cold currents. Warm water was a game changer. It felt like being welcomed home. I was only seven or eight on my first trip to Hawaii. I've been back to Hawaii a number of times since, but never back to this same beach.

And yet, I've visited many times, particularly when prompted to visualize a special place in nature during meditation. I'd often be prompted to also visualize some form of a spirit guide. I'd usually envision an older, wiser, "perfected" version of myself. She'd be sitting near or on the piece of driftwood or emerging from a swim in the sea. When I wasn't being led in a guided meditation, I'd often return to this peaceful scene whenever I was struggling with something challenging or at nights I lay in bed at home feeling lonely, even though one of my parents was home and in the next room. She'd allow me to sit and rest my head in her lap, stroking my hair and nurturing me in ways my mother never did (or perhaps knew how to).

No longer looking out onto the Atlantic Ocean but this illusory vision of the Pacific, it was darker there, perhaps early morning or evening, just before sunrise or sunset. There was no one else there, and yet I wasn't alone. I was pumping my arms as though I didn't have a choice, as though my life depended on it, until I realized there was another life at stake. A lifeless child lay before me.

From a beach paradise to a less-ideal backdrop, I was again meditatively transported, this time to a hospital exam room—another place I had been before, only somewhere I consciously tried to avoid whenever the memory arose. Coincidentally, the many times I've sat in that seat dreading my routine OB-GYN appointments, I've gazed up at the popcorn ceiling, willing

myself to imagine the tropical destination I so often go to while meditating. This visit was different; on this visit, I was spared the few moments of discomfort I dreaded so much.

My doctor walked in slowly, almost hesitantly, with pity in her eyes, though I didn't notice; I, too, would pity any woman in my seat. Besides, my doctor, who was kind enough, was never overly warm or engaging. Without a proper greeting or pleasantries, she stoically delivered my fate in the form of two simple words that would change the course of my life: "You're pregnant."

My mind returned to my utopian beach and the task at hand. I started pumping harder, more fervently, to save this baby's life. I fought back tears, as it dawned on me this child must be the baby I lost years before—a heartache I never properly grieved nor even wanted to look at. But I couldn't look away this time. I was ready to give up, succumb to the heat and my heavy heart, when I heard Bernstein yell for us to keep going. I pumped harder and harder, faster and faster, willing this child I wasn't ready for back to life.

In this meditative state, I started to realize I wasn't me, and the baby wasn't the unborn child I carried for six short weeks. As I looked closer at this sweet little girl, with the blondest hair, I realized it wasn't the baby I carried for six short weeks; it was me. This inner child I had neglected for so long had stopped breathing. And my spirit guide, who was nowhere in sight, was actually the one frantically pumping her arms—my internal mother fighting to save my inner child. With a final burst of energy and her counting us down, I surrendered to the movement, offering up all I had left in me. And just as the exercise was coming to a close, I saw the chest of that little girl start to rise, air returning to her lungs, her heart beginning to beat again (though faint), and her big brown eyes slowly opening. As I opened my own, I was back in Montauk,

tears streaming down my face, no longer concerned with hiding or holding them back—just in time for *śavāsana*.

Commentary: Understanding Modern Yoga Movements

I left the event feeling more connected to myself—my body and emotions—than I had in a long time. It was beautiful and terrible, as something I had long repressed was finally coming up for healing. In a New York minute, with no real understanding of what just happened or how to process it, I was racing across the state to catch a plane and back to business as usual. It would be two years before I actually started to integrate the experience. And while this profound, life-changing moment is the reason I'm here today, having committed the past seven years of my life to understanding what happened and how to continue healing all that lies beneath the surface, I now realize that there were some implications of the event that perhaps weren't very responsible.

Bernstein is a certified kundalini yoga instructor, yet absent from her event was some context of the tradition. The controversy of Kundalini Yoga, particularly abuse allegations of its founder Yogi Bhojan³, aside (something that, to the best of my knowledge, she has not publicly acknowledged), conditions weren't ideal for such a powerful practice. Even though there were many beginners in attendance, it wasn't a trauma-informed environment. There wasn't an introduction to what Kundalini Yoga is, nor the contraindications of the practice (for instance, how such an intense, heating exercise might not be ideal to practice on a hot summer day). Bernstein was unavailable following the event and virtually unreachable due to her massive following. Meanwhile, there weren't skilled yoga teachers or a support team on staff, or, if there were, it wasn't communicated to the audience. The only way to get support was to invest in her

³ Bhojan's former assistant calls out his abusive behavior in her memoir: Dyson, P. S. (2019). *Premka: White Bird in a Golden Cage: My life with Yogi Bhojan*. Eyes Wide Publishing.

pricey virtual Spirit Junkie community, and even then direct access to her was not included or guaranteed. These considerations could have offered a safer container for attendees, especially those with little yoga experience not to mention resources for integration.

Then, there were the event's subtle political implications. We can't escape that we live in a capitalist society. For this reason, Yoga has been reinterpreted from a countercultural movement of resisting colonization in the east to a pop culture movement in the west—something Andrea Jain dives into in her book *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (required reading for entering LMU's Graduate Yoga Studies program). Adopting yoga to our cultural norms offers an easy entry point for westerners to adopt such a transformative modality of healing, but capitalizing on healing runs the risk of cultural appropriation and reinforcing existing systems and structures that are oppressive. From a neoliberal capitalist lens, modern yoga movements in the west reinforce the idea that an individual is solely responsible for their conditions, as opposed to the community or culture acknowledging some responsibility. Those who are struggling or not in power are “doing it wrong” or making the wrong consumer choices. With this in mind, we can understand how a spiritual entrepreneur and yoga-lebrity gifting expensive yoga mats can be problematic. (Jain 2015)

My point isn't to point fingers at Bernstein; her work supported me during a very difficult time of transition and, after numerous Google searches of what Kundalini Yoga was, led me to find my own yoga community. Meanwhile, her event was a pivotal moment my life; it offered me a glimmer of what awakening might look and feel like, and ultimately led me down an entirely different path than the one I was on. My intention is, however, to apply the critical social justice lens I've since gained to my experience. Yoga in the west is a diversion from its ancient

eastern origins (perhaps the reason why Carl Jung believed westerners shouldn't practice yoga⁴), and it's important to be aware of the political messages and agendas inherent in even the most well-intentioned spaces.

In the end, it all worked out and led me here. And yet, having been to the dark places my shadow lurks following the event, it scares me to think of how it easily could have taken a turn and where others lacking the resources or means to find support could have ended up. Needless to say, this experienced has informed the way I approach teaching. May we continue learning and striving to do better.

Chapter 2: Yoga Origin Story

In 2018, I traveled to Costa Rica for 100 foundational hours of advanced yoga teacher training with one of my root teachers, Hannah Muse. Even after my initial 200 hours, led by her and Kenny Graham, I didn't have any aspirations to become a yoga teacher, but I was devoted to *svādhyāya* (स्वाध्याय), or self-study, and continuing to heal.

On one of the first days, Hannah invited us to journal about our yoga origin story, what first brought us to the practice and why we wanted to dive deeper in teacher trainings. Heartache is what came to mind, as I recalled my time in New York. As painful as my most recent heartbreak was, it wasn't just from one break-up but the *samskāras* that accumulated and compounded like interest after each. I noted how break-ups always felt more painful to me than others—at least from what I perceived.

For a long time, I assumed it was because of my parents' divorce when I was very young.

And while the event is an important part of my story, I've learned through many years

⁴ This is something modern yoga teacher and author Richard Rosen recently explored in an article I edited for [BreatheTogetherOnline.com](https://breathetogetheronline.com): <https://breathetogetheronline.com/yoga/richard-rosen-carl-jung/>

of *svādhyāya* that my core wounding is more accurately attributed to emotional and attachment trauma I experienced during childhood. Even the most amicable, healthy break-ups would bring me back to those feelings of separation and abandonment.

Then I remembered entering high school. My entry point into yoga was unique because I first encountered *āsana* (आसन), yoga poses or postures, at my Jesuit high school. As a freshman cheerleader, I had a crush on a senior football player. During our school-wide club fair, he invited me to try the Yoga Club, which he would be doing to counteract the intensity of the sport. *Of course it would be a boy that brought me to the mat, boy-crazy I was*, I thought and laughed to myself. The next week, my history teacher led a circle of students, mostly football players, in a short series of stretches that spanned 20 to 30 minutes—no meditation or mention of spirituality (if there was, I was far too distracted worrying about how I looked to my crush; I didn't dare look up at him sitting on the other side of the circle). Life went on, and I probably didn't step foot onto a yoga mat for close to a decade.

I kept working my way back through my memories. It was this same private high school, as well as a Catholic K-8 school, where I also learned ideas about God that contradict traditional Catholic doctrine. When asked if people who practiced different religions went to hell, a nun and teacher of mine explained that religion is like a mountain with many different paths to get to the top, where God resides⁵. She told us all that matters is that we make our way up to God and that “He” didn't care what path we took to get there. When addressing how we, as Catholics, rectify the sometimes contradictory, unjust messages found in the Bible, another religion teacher explained that while the authors of the Bible directly experienced God through divine inspiration,

⁵ This is aligned with the teachings of Sri Aurobindo, as well as Paramahansa Yogananda.

they were still limited by their human capacities and understanding, so couldn't possibly get everything exactly as God meant it. This belief stands in opposition to fundamentalist beliefs that the Bible is to be taken literally.

When looking at different religions, it's common to compare theologies in terms of monotheism, the belief in one God, and polytheism, belief in many gods or deities. One of the arguments for Christian fundamentalists against practicing yoga in schools, for instance, is not being able to separate yoga from Hinduism, a polytheistic tradition. However, there are other religious distinguishers, such as pantheism and panentheism. Contrary to Christian fundamentalism, which asserts God is separate from the earth, pantheism understands God to be within all beings and forms of creation. Meanwhile, panentheism supports the idea that God is present in all beings but specifies that the divine transcends worldly manifestations. We can see examples of panentheism in the *Rg Veda*, the first recorded texts of ancient Indian philosophy.

I finally remembered my first exposure to meditation was as far back as second grade. Due to this more liberal approach to Catholicism, I was open to the spiritual experiences I encountered in yoga, as well as Hindu mythology.

So when Hannah introduced us to Kālī, the often-feared Hindu deity of darkness, death, and dissolution, during my 200-hour training, I was open-minded, to say the least. During one of our *āsana* classes, she referenced her, inviting us to reach for her sword of discernment and, as we made a quick downward motion with our arms, "cut through the bullshit." Later, she told us some of the goddess' mythology, explaining that her love is often misunderstood. She destroys everything in our lives except that which cannot be destroyed. "Kālī manifested herself for the annihilation of demonic male power in order to restore peace and equilibrium," Ajit Mookerjee

explains in *Kali: The Feminine Force*. (Mookerjee 1995, p. 8) Around her neck, she wears a necklace of skulls of heads she's decapitated in battle—only the heads represent egos. She is understood to take away all the external ego factors until all that's left is the truth, one's essence. Her teaching mirrors what Loriliai Bernacki acknowledges in her book *Renowned Goddess of Desire: Women, Sex, and Speech in Tantra*: that Kali's symbolism offers healing for women, particularly western women, in systems of patriarchy. (Bernacki 2008)

It resonated. In fact, it felt like I had already met her. Some version of her visited me in a dream I couldn't shake back in the early spring of 2013, a dream that prompted me to uproot my life and leave behind all the external factors that once defined me to see what I would be left with.

Before my Costa Rica trip, I sought counsel from a then Kundalini Yoga teacher (who stopped teaching after more of Bhajan's abuse allegations came to light) and intuitive healer I was in a mentorship program with her. She suggested I choose a deity to place upon my altar (never mind that I didn't have an altar or know how to go about creating one).

"Who's the one that cuts through the bullshit?" I asked.

"Kālī," she smiled and nodded. And thus began my initiation and decent to the Goddess, one of the next phases of the heroine's journey.

After connecting with my angels, spirit guides, and ancestors at the end of our session, she also advised I try to see as many sunsets as I could while in Costa Rica. Unfortunately, I soon found out that, because of the side of the island we were on, you couldn't see the sunrise. Still, I awoke early most mornings, two of which I rode a hotel bike down to the beach.

On the first day, before the 100-hour intensive began, I arrived at the beach with a dear friend I had traveled with and grown close to during the initial 200-hour training (having to conquer a fear of co-teaching to a group of 30 strangers will do that to you). We put our stuff down and ran into the warm water—only, while she dove head first into the waves, I lingered closer to the shore.

“Get in!” She shouted.

“I’m kind of afraid of the ocean,” I admitted. “Kind of” was an understatement. As a young child, I used to love the ocean. You couldn’t get me out, in fact; I’d swim and play carefree for hours on end. Then, on one camping trip with my family to New Brighton beach in Santa Cruz, I got caught too far out in some large waves, following an El Niño storm. The ocean thrashed me around, and I thought I’d never come up for air. When I finally did, all I could see was my dad gesturing for me to turn around. I didn’t want to look back. I tried running back to shore, but I was frozen in place, powerless to the undertow. Just as I turned my head to see what he was pointing to, another wave swallowed me.

The terror of the once-friendly ocean that suddenly turned on me aside, I escaped the incident unharmed. But I went to bed scared that night, unable to shake the incident. Any time I was at the beach, the same fear would wash over me, even at the sight of small waves in the distance. I never wanted to lose control like that again. Friends would try to show me it wasn’t so bad. On one Hawaii trip the summer before eighth grade, while my cousins and friends boogie boarded, I was left out of the fun by choice, opting to float on my board out past the waves, where they couldn’t crash on me. Later, a friend walked along the beach with me, pretending to

trip and intentionally letting the waves knock her down to show me it wasn't so bad. Still, I clung to the safety of the shore.

It's not that I didn't want to conquer my fear. For years, I tried. Even when I lived near the ocean in Long Beach for college, my roommates and I had our bucket lists hung in our hall. At the top of mine: "dive under a wave." A simple task, I'd come close but always freeze up. Now decades later in Costa Rica, my new friend grabbed my hand and refused to let go until I dove under one with her.

"I will! Later in the week," I promised empty.

"No, now," she insisted.

Without much choice, I let her drag me toward the next wave hand in hand. I knew it would be worse if I didn't dive under, so I trusted. And it wasn't so bad, a little fun actually—until my eyes started to sting. It was a feeling I had felt in decades, as I swore off submerging myself in the ocean decades prior. Despite the discomfort, it dawned on me that this stinging sensation in my eyes was familiar. In fact, it was part of the reason I was so afraid as a child all those years ago. I remembered opening my eyes under water to try to catch my bearings. When I finally came up, I could hardly see as I tried to run for safety. Later in the week, I noticed how, returning to the beach, the ocean seemed to greet me like an old friend, or an excited dog when you return home after a long day away. By the end of our week in Costa Rica, I had returned to being the carefree girl you couldn't get out of the water. I was even boogie boarding, long after my friends got out of the water. I felt connected to the earth, the Goddess, being back in the water. Lyrics from an old country song came to mind, as I splashed around:

“I go down and sink my feet in the water
 And I soak up the sun and I watch it set
 I can feel the power, the saltwater gospel
 I’m as close to God as I can get.”
 –Eli Young Band, *Saltwater Gospel*

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It might have seemed like a small feat, but for me, this was a huge shift. I had reconnected with a younger part of myself I thought I had lost forever. I felt more alive than I had in years.

That was just the beginning. Throughout the week, I found myself widening my capacity for both grief and gratitude, tapping into potential I didn’t even know I had, and conquering other fears, ranging from getting into yoga postures I had never been able to before to singing and playing musical instruments—in front of other people—to teaching (this time solo) to teachers more experienced than me.

On our final morning together, I decided to try for one last sunrise, this time with three women from the group I had just met on the trip. While still dark outside, we met and rode bikes in silence, which we had been observing each morning, down to the beach. We didn’t speak until we started chanting the Gāyatrī Mantra together, a chant traditionally sung at sunrise and sunset in gratitude to Vedic god Savitṛ, often associated with Sūrya, the sun god.

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ॐ भूर्भुवः स्वः तत्सवितुर्वरेण्यं भर्गो देवस्य धीमहि धियो यो नः प्रचोदयात् ॥

om bhūr bhuvah svaḥ

tat savitur vareṇyam

bhargo devasya dhīmahi

dhiyo yo naḥ pracodayāt

– *R̥g Veda* 3.62.10

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We didn't see much of a sunrise that morning. The sun rose up behind clouds and hills in the distance. Yet we all stayed in a meditative silence, one by one getting up from the circle and makeshift altar we had created as we felt called. Without anyone in sight, we bathed naked in the ocean, walked wherever the morning breeze took us, communed with nature in whatever ways we were called.

When I emerged from the ocean, I walked along the shoreline, slowly being pulled to an oversized piece of driftwood. The scene felt eerily familiar. Reflecting on the week's events, it dawned on me why: I was at the place I often went to in meditation. It wasn't Hawaii, but the ocean was just as warm, the beach just as secluded, and the driftwood almost identical. I was even wearing something similar to what I'd visualize my spirit guide in. Not only was I actually there, *I was her*: that older, wiser, beautiful woman I often saw in meditation. I always knew she was an extension of my subconscious, someone I hoped to grow into someday, and here I was finally embodying her. It was as though all the times I had visited her in the past, I was visiting this version of myself. And she was guiding me to keep going, to come back home to myself. Even three years prior, at the event in Montauk, the internal mother pumping her arms so intently was future me, keeping me alive and aligned. I had finally caught up to her.

SECTION 2: LIBERATED

Chapter 1

In seventh grade, I took part in my school's Decathlon Club, an event between the other Catholic schools in the diocese with a range of competitions, both athletic and academic. Somehow, despite a fear of public speaking, I ended up being my school's representative for the speech challenge. Week after week, I'd meet with my third grade teacher in preparation and practice responding to various philosophical questions without easy answers. That part I enjoyed. It was the part about standing up in front of a group of strangers and delivering my truth—while obviously being judged, no less—that terrified me.

One prompt that always stuck with me was:

Respond to the following quote:

“Time heals all wounds.”

Explain why you agree or disagree.

This was a question I contemplated a lot leading up to the competition—and long after. On a physical level, I thought, *Yes, of course that's true. Just look at getting a cut or breaking a bone. The body is an intelligent system that can heal itself.* But then I thought about my childhood nervous tick of picking scabs. The wound doesn't heal if you keep reopening it, not to mention its potential for getting infected.

I thought about it some more. Although I hadn't experienced any obvious trauma, I knew on a felt sense that emotional wounds were much more complicated and required more than just time to heal. Wounds like a divorce. A cancer diagnosis. Years went by, and I added to this list: the death of a loved one. A broken heart.

I wondered if broken hearts healed the same way as physical wounds. They didn't seem to, at least not from what I perceived from others around me. Then, there were even more subtle wounds—only they weren't so subtle to me. Wounds of others I could actually feel. Others didn't seem to feel them, at least not as intensely as I felt them.

From a yoga therapy lens, these different layers of wounding might be understood as part of the *pañcamayakośas*, or five sheaths of the body. The most gross, the *annamaya kośa*, or food sheath, is the physical layer, where we might understand a physical wound healing on its own; the *prāṇamaya kośa* is the next layer, the energy sheath, where we might understand feeling empathetic of others' wounds; the *manomaya kośa* is the mental sheath, where mental and emotional wounds might reside. (The final two sheaths are the *vijñānamaya*, wisdom, and *ānandamaya*, bliss, *kośas*.) (*Yoga Therapy Foundations, Tools, and Practice* 2021, p. 285)

This prompt ended up being the one I was asked to respond to during the competition. I don't remember what came out of me, only that I couldn't come up with a definitive answer, stammering back and forth between reasons why it might be true and why it might not.

I'd often return to this question over the years, noticing how my answer had changed. With time—this proposed remedy for healing—I learned that some emotional wounds, like a broken heart, do eventually heal. Others, like losing a grandparent (or two or three), will never go away. Maybe these wounds were never meant to heal completely, and you wouldn't want

them to. Because the pain of losing them, the grief of missing them, is in direct proportion to how deeply you loved them, how much they touched your life.

Even decades later, I still come back to it. At this point in my life (and my answer may continue to change), I understand: time does not heal all wounds—at least not on its own and not in a linear way. Our emotional and internal wounds come back around and around until we're ready to heal and release them. Some we will never be able to. And that's okay.

It wasn't until I understood the nature of non-duality, typically attributed to Tantric Yoga traditions, or even the interdependence of dualities, for instance *puruṣa* (पुरुष) and *prakṛti* (प्रकृति) found in Sāṃkhya philosophy (Sarbacker 2021) that I could make space for multiple truths—even ones that seem to contradict each other—coexisting. With plurality in mind, I realized a yes or a no was never really the point of the prompt. No, the point, in the words of poet Jan Richardson⁶, is:

“to simply marvel
 at the mystery
 of how a heart
 so broken
 can go on beating,
 as if it were made
 for precisely this—
 as if it knows

⁶ From the poem “Blessing for the Broken Hearted” by Jan Richardson. <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2014/02/10/a-blessing-for-the-brokenhearted/>

the only cure for love
is more of it,

as if it sees
the heart's sole remedy
for breaking
is to love still,

as if it trusts
that its own
persistent pulse
is the rhythm
of a blessing
we cannot
begin to fathom
but will save us
nonetheless.”

–Jan Richardson, “A Blessing for the Broken Hearted”

Chapter 2: The Rupture

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“Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand that this too, was a gift.”

—Mary Oliver

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While still in Costa Rica, Hannah invited us to recall or imagine an experience of pure unconditional love during meditation, perhaps the day we were born. My eyes filled with tears as I realized this may be the only time I could remember my parents being happy—and it wasn't even a memory but a photograph. Together or separated, my parents smiles and expressions never looked as genuine and joy-filled, at least to my recollection, as they do in the one photo I have of them holding me in the hospital room on the day I was born.

The first memory I do have is a couple years later—a memory that only came back into my consciousness after years of yoga.

It was 1989. I was only two, but I still remember the way the earth shook underneath my feet. My baby-sitter Teresa huddled the children in her care, including me, up under the front door frame during the shaking, then brought us all out into the front yard when it was over, mere moments later. I remember the view of a plastic play structure, about my height, that brought me a surprising sense of calm. I don't remember feeling afraid at all.

I don't remember my dad getting there, though, from the number of times he's retold the story, I can picture his burgundy hatchback Jeep driving up the suburban street and pulling into the driveway with the basketball hoop. He was on the freeway, on his way to pick me up after work, when the Loma Prieta earthquake hit.

I don't remember saying goodbye to Teresa or the drive home. But I'll never forget walking into my childhood bedroom, shelves hanging off the walls, picture frames and mementos shattered, furniture disheveled, my world uprooted.

I didn't understand. It felt violating, the way I'd feel more than a decade later when my home was broken into, possessions ransacked, jewelry and valuables stolen. Unlike that experience, however, there was no "other" that could be blamed. Even to my two-year-old mind, this didn't seem fair. None of us—my father, mother, or I—had made the mess, but no one was coming to help us clean it up. There was no reason or explanation given; it simply was.

After the rupture came the aftershocks. I walked a little more cautiously on the ground that was once so steady and trust-worthy. The shaking may have stopped, but the fault line causing friction between my parents was very much still active. It was as though the tectonic plates moving below the earth's surface brought their underlying issues to the surface.

One night, my parents started fighting in front of me. In a fit of anger, my mother sent me to my room and shut the door. I was too young to understand she wasn't mad at me. I cried and cried, waiting for someone to come in and explain to me what had happened, to tell me everything was going to be okay, or at the very least to say goodnight. No one did. The experience felt foreign, and I didn't know to put myself to bed, let alone how to self-soothe.

In the middle of the night, after they finally went to bed, I opened the door. I could barely see in the pitch black; the ground felt shaky, like it did when the earth quaked. (I was also fairly new to the whole walking thing, and the sense deprivation didn't make it any easier.) I can't remember exactly what happened when I reached my dad's side of the bed, but I have the sense that it was ultimately my mother that turned me away. Regardless, I was rejected. The thought of walking back to my dark, lonely, empty room and putting myself to bed was more than I could bear. Feeling betrayed and defeated, particularly by my mother, I exited their room but lingered

near the light from their doorway. I quietly cried myself to sleep, right there in the middle of the dark hallway.

I don't remember waking up in the hallway, if my parents found me there, or how I eventually woke up in my own bed. In all honesty, I don't even know if that memory actually happened or if I dreamt it. What I do know is that's how my undeveloped brain made sense of the rejection. After that night, I felt a gravitational pull to leave my body and energy field to anticipate the needs of my parents, caregivers, and those in a position of authority. In childhood, it's easy to entangle our needs with the needs of our parents because we rely on them for survival. In this moment of darkness, representing my initial separation from the feminine (another phase of the heroine's journey), I became aware of how much I needed my parents—and needed them to be okay. This is when enmeshment became the blueprint for my parent-child dynamic.

Commentary: Understanding Yoga Therapy

Attachment styles develop from a child's relationship to space. If they receive too much space from a parent or primary caregiver, they can become anxiously attached. If they don't receive enough space, they can become avoidant. On this night, I developed an anxious-avoidant attachment style: anxious because I didn't want to be left alone, avoidant because I lost trust that my caregivers would be there to support me.

Louis Cozolino, PhD explains,

“If we are dysregulated as infants, we reflexively cry out to summon our parents.

If the caretaker arrives and we move to a state of regulation, our primitive brain

circuitry pairs the presence of the other with positive emotion... [I]f we are crying

out and no one arrives...we will not associate the arrival of the other with reregulation. We may even come to associate the other with an increase in distress...[which] may lead to an insecure attachment style. People with insecure attachment styles lack the ability to be soothed by others in a consistent and predictable way. Overall, the difference between a secure and insecure attachment style is this—secure attachments help to regulate arousal and anxiety while insecure attachments do not.” (Cozolino 2012, 104-5)

To cope with the trauma I experienced on this night, and in the hopes of avoiding a similar situation of rejection, I started to fawn⁷ as a coping mechanism. I also created a story, an interpretation of the series of events that turned into an unconscious belief: that I could not trust anyone—not even the two people that created me—to not one day reject me. This belief was at the root of my *samskāras*. It became a part of my shadow that would manifest in a myriad of ways. This unhealthy relational dynamic with my parents would manifest as codependency.

Another seismic shift was about to crack the foundation of my home, the bedrock of my world. Two years later, my parents would separate and we would move out of my childhood home. Another rupture without reason; a different kind of mess that no one was helping us clean up. While no one could be blamed for the natural disaster of 1989, no one dared speak about the interpersonal disaster ravaging my home this time. Unconsciously, I’d entangle the feeling of the earthquake with the rupture of my parents’ marriage and upheaval of moving out of my childhood home.

⁷ Pete Walker, psychotherapist and author of *The 4Fs: A Trauma Typology in Complex Trauma*, proposes a fourth instinctual response to trauma called fawning, characterized by appeasing behaviors to avoid conflict.

For an only child of no more than four years old, I tried to make sense of why I had to leave my home and would never see it again; why my mother and I were going to live with my grandma, while my father was moving into a one-bedroom apartment with a makeshift room for me in a corner of the living room; why my parents could barely stand to be in the same room together, why they weren't looking at each other, let alone talking to each other or to me for that matter about this major life change. With no answers, I traded reality for fantasy. I grew attached to the idea that this was all a big misunderstanding that could easily be fixed by a conversation, that they were really still in love even (Disney movies on repeat on the screen I was placed in front of didn't help).

In my early 20s, I was a nanny to two much younger cousins: an infant and a toddler. I'd watch them at their home in San Jose, California, while their mom, my aunt, and her husband were at work. They owned a large, older PC laptop that would flash inspirational quotes across the screen while in sleep mode. One of these quotes read something along the lines of:

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“The greatest kind of love is when your love for someone outweighs your need for them.”

—Unknown

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This resonated with me deeply, even though I had never experienced this kind of love. I didn't have any models of healthy partnership or a point of reference that there could be love without unhealthy attachment.

At the time, I was in a long distance, cross-country relationship with someone I had very little in common with. We had met months prior on my first visit to New York. I left for the trip fresh out of back-to-back relationships. I had a great week with fellow students, but toward the end of the trip, it became very clear to me that I would be returning home to no one. This terrified me. But something unfamiliar washed over me; deeper than a fleeting thought, stronger than a feeling, an inner knowing told me I needed to be alone, to process and grieve, to cultivate a relationship with myself for maybe the first time in my life.

So, naturally, I did the opposite. At this point, I didn't have a spiritual practice. I didn't meditate or practice yoga, nor was I attuned to my intuition (or body, for that matter). My world revolved around others. I sought external validation—a source of safety and security for me—from anyone and everyone else. The next day, my aunt picked me up to take me to her home in New Jersey, so I could visit with my distant family for the weekend. As we drove into the quiet country, the lights of the big city started to fade and the energy started to wane. When we arrived, I met a friend of my family's and, less than 24 hours after my intuitive insights, I followed his lead into starting a new relationship with no hope of survival. Despite the distance and really not knowing anything about each other (I spun as a positive thing, considering I was in no shape to share my aching heart with anyone), I traded my inner knowing for his impulsive desires. This self-abandonment—swallowing my truth, putting others before myself, anticipating their needs—was something I was used to. Codependency was my sickness, my addiction, my dis-ease. The only thing holding us together, months later, was my grip.

As a child, with little capacity for self-regulation or self-soothing, I unconsciously developed coping mechanisms, or survival strategies, in response to a lack of attunement from

my parents. The threat of my core needs not being met activated—and sometimes still activates—my nervous system and often manifested as excessive people-pleasing. In this “relationship,” if you can even call it that, my (at the time) unconscious fear of reliving that childhood rejection kept me holding on, even though I knew we weren’t right for each other. Back in 2008, before ghosting was even a thing, this boyfriend of nine months stopped returning my phone calls. It was the first relationship I was in that I didn’t end, my first heartache that I didn’t cause or have “control” over. Though I wouldn’t connect the dots for awhile, this reopened my core childhood wound.

It wasn’t until I found yoga that I was able to develop tools and techniques for developing my parasympathetic nervous system to restore balance and feelings of safety. According to Patrinos, “People have an individual range of sensitivity to sensation, stress, and arousal—a ‘window of tolerance’ based on their personal history and lifestyle. When one is outside their window of tolerance, the nervous system becomes dysregulated.” The polyvagal theory, introduced by Stephen Porges in 1994, further explains that the vagus nerve is responsible for the mind communicating with the body. When a threat is perceived in the mind, the sympathetic nervous system becomes activated, as the body prepares to fight or flee, or, when overwhelmed, freeze. Developing a strong parasympathetic nervous system communicates to the brain that it is safe.

“Yoga provides ‘neural exercise, and a methodology of working with the *gunas*, for the regulation and resilience of the system,’ Patrinos continues. The *gunas* (गुण) are energetic qualities that make up the Universe, as well as each individual. They include *sattva* (सत्त्व), or balance and harmony, *rajas* (रजस), or passion and energy, and *tamas* (तमस), or inertia and

inactivity. From this lens, we might consider the parasympathetic nervous system, also recognized as the “rest and digest” response, to represent *sattva*; an activated sympathetic nervous system in a fight or flee state to be experiencing excessive *rajas*; and the freeze state to be an imbalance of *tamas*. (*Yoga Therapy Foundations, Tools, and Practice* 2021, p. 285)

In addition to a premodern framework for understanding polyvagal theory, Yoga offers practices, including *āsana* (poses or postures), *prāṇāyāma* (breath work), and *dhyāna* meditation, that balance the *guṇas* and stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system. In the *haṭhayogapradīpikā* (हठयोगप्रदीपिका) specifically, the *guṇas* are referenced when describing the importance of daily *prāṇāyāma* with a *sattvic* state of mind⁸. In my personal experience, my *sādhanā* (साधना), or daily spiritual practice, introduced to me during my initial 200-hour teacher training, includes many of the *ṣaṭkarma* (षट्कर्म), or cleansing practices, and *prāṇāyāma* found in the ancient text. After years of practice, I have experienced a greater sense of harmony and balance, which is especially obvious when I miss a day.

(Muktibodhananda, 2013, p. 160)

Over time and with consistent practice, Yoga has allowed me to widen my window of tolerance and capacity—not only for challenging situations but also for joy. This ancient assertion supports the more recent concept of neuroplasticity: the capacity for the brain to create new neural pathways through consistent action.

Chapter 3: Demons and Mermaids

I stood at the edge of “la trampolina,” an opening on a wooden dock overlooking a 40-foot jump down into Lake Atitlan, Guatemala. My teacher invited me, along with the handful of

⁸ Chapter 2, Verse 6. Muktibodhananda, S. (2013). *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (Golden Jubilee). Yoga Publications Trust.

others on our yoga retreat that braved the free fall, to consider what we might want the healing waters to wash away. On a physical level, I hoped the icy lake would ease my burning womb space. On a more subtle level, I knew my infection was a manifestation of a greater dis-ease: codependency.

I took a step back, hesitating. My teacher's nine-year-old daughter looked at me and said enthusiastically, "You can do this! You're a mermaid" (referencing a fairy tale we made up together during our hours-long daily bus rides). It reminded me of a part in the *Ramayana* that my teacher loves to tell her daughter and students. At one point during the Indian epic, Hanuman, a mythical monkey and hero of the story (although he does not realize it at this point), feels defeated and ready to give up. Jambavan, a *kalyāṇamitra* (कल्याणमित्र), or friend on the spiritual path, turns to him and reminds him of his true nature, telling him he has all the powers in the Universe. Upon realizing this, Hanuman takes the miraculous leap from India to Sri Lanka to fulfill his *dharma*. (Dreamland Publications)

Now, I certainly don't consider myself on par with Hanuman, but something in this sweet girl's eyes, the way she looked at me in a way I couldn't see myself, as well as the innocence and sincerity of her words—I couldn't let her down. I turned back around, took a step forward, back toward the edge, kept my eyes at the horizon, took a deep breath, and stepped off into the unknown.

From a Jungian lens, I now understand the water to represent my unconscious. Meanwhile, my initiation into these waters represented my individuation process, as it held the potential to liberate me from codependency. "Individuation means becoming a single, homogenous being," explains Carl Jung, who coined the term, "and, in so far as 'individuality'

embraces our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self. We could therefore translate individuation as... 'self-realization'" (*The Jung Reader* 2012).

I'd love to say that when I came up for air, I was magically healed and immediately cured of my attachment issues. On the contrary, as Evelyn Underhill (2019) suggests, "The most intense period of that great swing-back into darkness which usually divides the 'first mystic life,' or Illuminative Way, from the 'second mystic life,' or Unitive Way, is generally a period of utter blankness and stagnation, so far as mystical activity is concerned." If anything, I felt more uncertain and afraid after that extra few seconds midair when your heart skips a beat and the seconds that feel like an eternity when you're trying to come up for water. Though I had risen to the surface and safely made my way to the shore, I was now swimming in uncharted waters. I had started a descent into the depths of my unconscious, and I didn't know what was waiting for me when (and if) I emerged.

Eight months later, I dove into another opportunity to travel with my teacher and her daughter, this time to Bali for a women's pilgrimage exploring the Divine Feminine, the different forms of the Goddess.

On our first day, it was a hot and humid. Ruby came up to the *sāla* (शाल), where we practiced yoga, walked right up to me, and sat on my lap. My body tensed, and I heard a voice in my head resist, saying it was too hot. But it didn't take long for me to identify that the voice was not actually mine. It was the voice of my mother's, who rarely allowed me to stay after sitting on her lap, especially after I reached a certain age. It was either too hot or my butt was too bony. Time after time, I felt this rejection and longed for the sense of touch, her embrace. In that

moment, I realized what an honor it was that, out of 15 other women, this little girl wanted to sit in my lap. I softened.

Ruby brought a book, titled *Legendary Ladies: 50 Goddesses to Empower and Inspire You*. Each morning, her mom would whisper a goddess in her ear—the one we would be learning about and working with—and she would draw the goddess in great detail on the whiteboard. In the morning, we would learn about a specific deity. In the afternoon, we would put what we learned into practice. On the second day, we were introduced to Kuan Yin, a Chinese goddess, and Tara, a Hindu goddess—both deities associated with compassion and found in Buddhist traditions. Ruby drew the goddess atop a lotus flower, just like the ones that bloomed each day at sunrise and contracted at sunset. Considered the “mother of liberation,” Tara is summoned for releasing shadow work and befriending *asuras* असुर (demons).

After our lesson, Hannah led us through a “feeding your demons” meditation⁹, a Buddhism-inspired five-step process that involves locating the demon within, personifying it and finding out what it needs, becoming the demon, feeding it and meeting the ally, and finally resting in awareness.

Though I didn’t initially make the connection to Guatemala, I knew I wanted to work with my “demon” of codependency. I found it hard to personify this malady during the exercise, but I felt sensations of tension, shivering, chills, feeling cold. I couldn’t understand why the image of Ursula’s eels, Flotsam and Jetsam, came to mind, but I tried to stay with my teacher’s cues without trying to rationalize or overthink. Upon feeding them what they wanted/needed,

⁹ Developed by [Lama Tsultrim Allione](#), an author with a Tibetan Buddhist lineage.

they transformed into a neglected young child that had been crying out for its mother. Through this process, I became aware of my core needs that were not met as a child.

Later in the afternoon, we visited Tirta Empul, a Hindu Balinese water temple to complete our releasing ritual. Soon, our group would be entering the bathing pools, submerging our heads under each of the sacred springs. Waiting in line to walk slowly into the icy temple waters was almost more unnerving than jumping 40 feet into Lake Atitlan.

Inviting us to maintain a meditative state with an internal gaze and noble silence, Hannah offered that through our releasing ceremony, we might embrace what we wanted to let go of, to consider how it might have served us at one time, rather than pushing it away or trying to get rid of. I recently learned that “flotsam” is a word used to describe the debris from a ship that naturally falls away, while “jetsam” is trash that’s thrown overboard on purpose. Our challenge was not to treat our inner demon as jetsam but to face it through acknowledgement and even welcoming, so that it might fall like flotsam.

As the line to submerge slowly inched forward, I did my best to self-soothe. I maintained a meditative gaze, breathed deeply. I noticed my teacher with her daughter up ahead of me. I imagined how I might soothe a small child, perhaps taking it in my arms. I thought of the child my demons turned into. To my surprise, though the water was shockingly cold, it wasn’t as bad as I was anticipating—not when I had an imaginary child to protect.

As I proceeded to the springs, I heard a child crying behind me. And I held on to my pretend child even tighter. When I tilted my head back underneath the rushing spring, I remembered Ruby’s words to me: “You can do this! You’re a mermaid.” And it all came flooding

back. Here I was, months later, still working with the same *saṃskāra* of codependency. *Of course Ursula's eels came to mind*, I thought. *I'm "a mermaid"*.

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